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A Collaborative Approach to Defining the Usefulness of Impact

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A collaborative approach to research and impact: lessons from a knowledge exchange project involving academics and social work practitioners.

Abstract

This article reports on a knowledge exchange project involving academics at the University of Edinburgh and practitioners in six local authority social work departments. We contribute to recent debates about the co-production of knowledge, presenting findings in three key areas: the importance of relationships for knowledge exchange; ‘what works’ for practitioners engaging with academics; and the value of practitioner research for enabling knowledge exchange. We also consider impact, arguing that academic and performance management notions of impact and research quality risk eclipsing the perspectives of research users.

Key words: knowledge exchange; impact; practitioner research; social work

Introduction

Much has been written in recent years about the use of research evidence to inform public services, and social work has been no exception to this trend. Whilst there is consensus that research has an important role to play in social services, debates continue about the nature of knowledge and knowledge use in this field (Walter et al., 2004, Alexanderson et al., 2009, Lunt et al., 2010, Gray and Schubert, 2011, Nevo and Slonim-Nevo, 2011), and how the resulting impacts are to be understood and evaluated (Newman and Nutley, 2003, Canavan et al., 2009, Antonacopoulou, 2010, Armstrong and Alsop, 2010). In this paper, we contribute to these debates by drawing

on our experiences in a knowledge exchange project involving academics at a University and practitioners in six local authority social work departments. The project was based on: an understanding of knowledge as diverse, encompassing both academic research findings and practitioner expertise; an understanding of research use as being local and context-specific; and a desire to promote greater dialogue between academics and practitioners, in the hope that this would bring benefits to both groups. As such, the project can be seen as combining elements of what Nutley et al. (2007) refer to as the ‘embedded research’ and ‘organisational excellence’ models of research use in practice contexts (see also Walter et al., 2004).

We describe the knowledge exchange processes carried out in our project, and reflect on their results. Our findings add weight to previous research that highlights the value of building relationships in which knowledge can be produced collaboratively (Bowen et al., 2005, Nutley et al., 2007, Alexanderson et al., 2009, Mitchell et al., 2009, Martin, 2010), and we suggest some practical ways to achieve this. We engage with recent debates about practitioner-led research (for example, Cunningham, 2008, Fouche and Lunt, 2010, Lunt et al., 2010, Mitchell et al., 2010, Shaw and Lunt, 2011), arguing that this approach is of particular value for forging relationships between academics and practitioners, even where the research produced – viewed from an academic perspective – may have epistemological and methodological limitations.

We also contribute to current discussions about research impact by highlighting how impact may be understood differently by different stakeholders. We argue that whilst academics’ and UK funding councils’ understandings of research impact may be increasingly dominant, they risk eclipsing research users’ views. Localised

practitioner understandings of impact may present a different perspective that deserves consideration. We also raise the issue of service users' perspectives on impact and what role – if any – these should play in judging the costs and benefits of research.

Background

Our project can be seen as part of a growing interest in, and shift towards, greater use of research evidence in UK public services. Current practices in this area are grounded in discourses developed during the 1990s, focusing on 'evidence-based' policy, and calling for "developments in both capabilities and competencies for the better use of evidence in policy and practice" (Boaz et al., 2008:236). A key response has been the development of the academic field of knowledge transfer and exchange (Davies et al., 2000). Greater understanding of knowledge exchange processes has highlighted the active and important roles of intermediaries and knowledge brokers, who stimulate and instigate exchanges between academics and practitioners (Boaz et al., 2008). The development of knowledge exchange as an academic field has to be viewed alongside the concurrent policy interest that has encouraged greater use of research and evidence in practice. Of relevance to our project, for example, Shaw and Lunt (2011) note that *Changing Lives: The Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review* (Scottish Executive, 2006) led directly to the implementation of practitioner research in Scottish social work practice. Similarly, from 1997 the UK's Local Authorities and Research Councils' Initiative (LARCI) has aimed to "encourage and facilitate knowledge exchange between the research councils and local authorities at a strategic and operational level." (Boaz et al., 2008:237)

One of the key themes in recent research about knowledge exchange is the potential of partnerships between academics and research ‘users’ (Ross et al., 2003, Alexanderson et al., 2009, Mitchell et al., 2009, Martin, 2010). It has been claimed that such partnerships may be “the most important factor determining whether or not research evidence is used by decision-makers.” (Mitchell et al., 2009: 104) There is a growing recognition of the role of interpersonal relationships and factors such as trust in enabling knowledge exchange (Bowen et al., 2005). Nutley et al. suggest that:

“personal contact...seems to be the most important route for research to enter policy and practice. This suggests that research use may above all be a social process, involving interaction among individuals and the joint (re)construction of research evidence through ongoing debate, interplay and exchange.” (Nutley et al., 2007: 88-89)

Related to this are arguments about the value of knowledge that is co-produced between academics and practitioners or policy makers. Co-production can be understood as a situation in which “users are involved throughout the research process, from agenda-setting, through design, fieldwork and communication of outcomes” (Armstrong and Alsop, 2010: 209). It has been suggested that such co-production ensures that research benefits from the local knowledge of practitioners, generates more practice-relevant research, and enables academics to improve their ability to communicate to wider audiences (Antonacopoulou, 2010, Orr and Bennett, 2010).

Co-production can take various forms (Martin, 2010, Walker, 2010), but at its most fully developed, it involves research users, such as practitioners, playing an active role in designing, carrying out and disseminating research. Practitioner research is currently on the rise, particularly within social work (Cunningham, 2008, Fouche and Lunt, 2010, Lunt et al., 2010, Mitchell et al., 2010). Given the growing recognition of “the active role that individual practitioners play in how research gets used” (Nutley et al., 2007:43), practitioner research can be seen as a way to operationalise the shift from knowledge transfer to knowledge exchange. In the context of social work, it is also arguably more appropriate than the evidence based practice model (Petch, 2009); the latter originated in medicine, a profession dominated by positivistic understandings of science and knowledge, whereas social work, by contrast, has always been an explicitly value-laden profession, in which practitioners’ judgements and interpretations play an essential role (Nevo and Slonim-Nevo, 2011).

Project aims and methods

Against this background, our project aimed to explore knowledge exchange, and the associated issue of impact, with social workers from six Scottish local authorities. The project was co-led by two academics, one based in a multi-disciplinary social science research centre, the other in the social work subject group. This arrangement proved particularly effective in bringing together the knowledge exchange expertise built up over time by the research centre, and the subject specific knowledge and professional contacts of the social work academic.

Initial discussions with key contacts in the local authorities identified the topic of ‘engaging with involuntary service users in social work’ as an area of mutual interest.

The recent growth of activity around service user rights, participation and the rhetoric of consumerism has given rise to particular tensions in social work, where many of the 'service users' are receiving services reluctantly, as the result of legal mandate. As McLaughlin (2009:1109) explains, "there is a point in social work practice whereby the social worker is expected to act on their own professional assessment of the situation, informed by agency policy, legal mandates and research, irrespective of what the service user's choices or views are." Service user engagement was therefore an issue with considerable scope for discussion and debate between academics and practitioners about what might constitute good practice in this area.

The project was part of a wider programme exploring engagement between universities and local government (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/engage/>). This comprised five different projects across Scotland, each lasting up to 12 months, designed to enhance knowledge exchange between academics and local authorities.

The activities we carried out were informed by recent and current debates on knowledge exchange. Our plans took into account the importance of dialogue and discussion, moving away from didactic and passive models of dissemination. We were also keen to explore the possibilities of co-producing research with social work practitioners. The project therefore included the following components:

The production of a research briefing and two literature reviews summarising key messages from previous research on user engagement in social work. These were intended as tools for stimulating dialogue and debate with and amongst practitioners, not merely as collections of knowledge to be taken away and read. The briefing in

particular was designed to be accessible and concise. These documents can be downloaded from <http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/esla/resources/publications>

Three knowledge sharing seminars organised by the research team, to which academics and social work practitioners from the six participating local authorities were invited. The events were structured so as to generate dialogue, initially through a focus on the briefings and literature reviews. Short presentations about research evidence and concepts were followed by longer sessions for structured small-group discussions. Each event had around 30 attendees. In total, across all three seminars, around 70 local authority staff were involved (including front line social workers, team leaders, managers, learning and development staff), along with ten academics (including researchers, lecturers, professors and PhD students).

Practitioner-led research projects (PRPs). These involved social work staff carrying out small research projects over eight months. Practitioners were invited to take the lead, choosing the focus of their project under the broad rubric of working with involuntary clients. In line with current best practice (Lunt et al., 2010, Mitchell et al., 2010, Shaw and Lunt, 2011), each project was provided with mentoring via regular face-to-face meetings, emails and phone calls with a social work academic with appropriate expertise. Practitioners were also invited to a series of four half-day training workshops designed to provide support, guidance and training in research skills at key stages of the process. Seven PRPs took place, of which six were completed. Some were carried out by single practitioners; other projects involved collaborations between two or more practitioners. The PRPs linked into the seminars: at the first seminar, proposals were invited; at the second, practitioner-researchers

gave a progress update via a panel discussion; at the third, they presented their findings using posters and ‘market stalls’ containing project materials.

The production of a ‘good practice guide’, a short, accessible booklet aimed at social work practitioners. The guide included a mixture of (i) insights from the research literature and (ii) ideas and knowledge from social workers who had attended seminars during the project. Hard copies of the guide were distributed via the various channels and networks developed during the project. An online version is also available at <http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/esla/resources/publications>

The centre where the project was based has dedicated knowledge exchange staff. These include an experienced events organiser, who provided assistance with the seminars, and a graphic designer, who helped produce the briefing, good practice guide and a project logo, which gave a coherent ‘identity’ to the project and all the materials produced.

A number of methods were used to gather data about the project’s knowledge exchange processes. Flipcharts were used to record key discussions in the seminars and these were later written up. Feedback surveys were used at the end of each seminar to record attendees’ views about the events. At the training sessions for the PRPs, feedback surveys were also used, and notes were taken during discussions.

We carried out a simple contribution analysis to assess the impacts achieved by the project. Contribution analysis is a method for exploring the extent to which a particular programme of activity has contributed to observed changes, taking into

account other influencing factors (Mayne, 2008). We opted to use this approach because in our project, there were many contextual factors that we anticipated might help or hinder impact. Local authority social work is a highly politicised field, with departments often driven by, for example, inspection results, high profile media cases and local funding priorities. The recent agenda of funding cuts to public services in the UK was also expected to affect impacts. Contribution analysis involves consideration of such factors, and their effects on impact.

Following Mayne's (2008) framework, a theory of change was developed in consultation with the practitioner-researchers. Two methods were used to provide data about impacts for the contribution analysis. The first of these was based around 'action cards'. At the first seminar, each attendee was given a card and asked to write down up to three things that they hoped to do over the course of the project as a result of their involvement. Each card also recorded the person's name and email address. In total 26 cards were completed. Towards the end of the project, an email was sent to each person, reminding them of what they had said they would do, and asking them how much progress they thought they had made, and what had helped or hindered this. The emails emphasised that our aim was to gauge the effects of our project, not to assess the performance of individuals. We received 12 responses (response rate = 46%), of which seven were from people who had been involved with the PRPs.

Three months after the PRPs had ended, we invited all the practitioners who had completed PRPs to a meeting. They were asked beforehand, by email, "to come prepared to speak informally for five minutes or so about one way in which being involved with our project has had an impact on your area of work." We deliberately

refrained from defining what we meant by ‘impact’ to allow us to gain a sense of how the practitioners themselves understood the term. Five practitioners attended the meeting, representing four out of the six completed projects. The project team chaired the meeting, allowing each practitioner to report and making time for group discussion. The session was audio recorded, with the practitioners’ consent, and notes were written about the recording, including transcription of key quotes.

The remainder of our paper presents our findings in relation to knowledge exchange and impact.

The importance of relationships

As noted above, partnerships between academics and research users are increasingly recognised as helpful for knowledge exchange (Cousins and Simon, 1996, Bowen et al., 2005, Nutley et al., 2007, Mitchell et al., 2009). Our project reinforced this impression. The most significant impacts – in terms of knowledge exchange, capacity building and reported changes to practice and service delivery – were associated with the PRPs, through which close working relationships were established between academics and practitioners. We return to discuss the PRPs in detail below, but first we want to share some of the insights we gained into the role of relationships in knowledge exchange.

The first was that face-to-face contact was experienced as particularly valuable by both academics and practitioners. As Nutley et al. (Nutley et al., 2007:74) argue, “[p]ersonal contact is crucial...studies suggest that it is face-to-face interactions that are most likely to encourage policy and practice uses of research.” In our case, this

was evident from the outset. For example, with one local authority, personal contact proved crucial in ensuring that a PRP even got off the ground. In this case, a senior manager at directorate level, who had been our point of liason in planning the project, left her post after the project had been agreed and awarded funding, but before it commenced. It soon transpired that she had not formally passed on information or responsibility for the project to her replacement. The social work academic co-leading the project was able, on the basis of past working relationships, to make personal contact with the new post-holder to explain the project and the commitment made by the local authority. Sensing the low priority being given to this at a time of organisational change, he was also able to suggest a possible practitioner researcher, again informed by his interpersonal connections within the authority, and was given the go-ahead to make this approach directly. This particular PRP was subsequently brought to a very successful completion.

The importance of face-to-face contact in our project may have been accentuated by the fact that local authorities in the UK appear slow to embrace new communication technologies due to fears about security and liability. For example, at the start of the project, we wanted to explore online tools for communication, and accordingly set up a project wiki. However, this proved to be inaccessible for a number of our key contacts due to local authority firewalls, and attempts to negotiate access with local authority gatekeepers proved futile. The wiki was soon abandoned.

Similarly, in the early stages of the project, emails sent by the research team to local authority contact often received only automated responses. As the project progressed, however, those with whom we were having increasing amounts of face-to-face

contact began to answer emails more promptly and fully. One practitioner explained that he can receive as many as 50 emails per day, some of which will require urgent action. Non-urgent emails are therefore often overlooked, unless they come from someone with whom he has close ties. On occasion, emails also fell foul of local authority spam filters misidentifying content as inappropriate.

Another insight concerns relationships between practitioners. Indeed our project exposed the very category of ‘practitioners’ as problematic. The professionals with whom we worked were far from a homogenous group, coming from six local authorities and encompassing front line social workers, social work students, team leaders, learning development and quality assurance staff, information officers and people at various levels of management. It soon became clear that knowledge exchange depended as much upon the relationships *between* these different groups as on their relationships with academics. For example, one practitioner spoke about how a change of job had, by coincidence, brought him into regular contact with the chief social work officer (CSO) in his local authority. As a result of this, a relationship had formed, leading to the CSO using the practitioner’s PRP report as a way to stimulate debate about relationship-based social working:

“if I’d still been sitting as a front line team leader, I wouldn’t have been in the same building, I wouldn’t have been sharing a coffee machine, I wouldn’t be doing all these things that allow relationships to form.”

(Practitioner 1, comment in group discussion about impacts)

As these comments suggest, the absence of such relationships can be a barrier to partnership working, particularly where organisational micro-politics mitigate against knowledge exchange. For example, one PRP ran into difficulties recruiting service users to participate in their research. This project was being carried out by learning development staff, who did not have any direct contact with service users, and who were therefore reliant on front line workers to help them identify potential participants. The PRP team e-mailed all of the team leaders in their authority, but received no response despite enlisting the help of the service manager, who also sent an e-mail to 'prompt' team leaders. Changing tactics, the practitioners then tried attending front-line team meetings in an attempt to make direct personal contact with their colleagues. Through this, they discovered that there were barriers in terms of timing (another research project was already taking place that involved interviewing families), mistrust (a sense that social workers might feel under 'scrutiny' from learning development) and workload (front line workers were extremely busy with direct case work and did see the research as a priority). These are, of course, common problems for academic researchers; our mistake was to assume that they would not be an issue for practitioners.

Thinking practically about what helped to build relationships between and amongst academic and practitioners in our project, the practitioner research projects were particularly effective in this regard. We return to discuss these in more detail below. Some other elements of good practice included:

- *Consultation with local authority partners on key decisions from the outset.* This began with the development of the research proposal and the choice of topic, and

continued through decisions about the planning of events (asking them what were the most suitable days, dates, times, locations and formats) and the production of project materials.

- *Making time for discussion and debate at events.* Feedback from the events indicated that attendees valued the opportunities for interaction above everything else. Based on our experience, we would strongly advocate keeping presentations short and allowing ample time for interaction at knowledge exchange events. We found that small group discussions worked best when facilitated by academics from the host organisation, who were briefed beforehand about what was required.
- *Organising high quality events.* This may seem banal, but practitioners repeatedly expressed their appreciation for the high quality catering and venues we used. Our budget was relatively modest, but we were able to achieve value for money by looking widely at all the available options. Having the services of an experienced events administrator in our research centre was particularly helpful with this.

Knowledge exchange: ‘what works’ for practitioners?

Notions of evidence-based practice and the rise of New Labour’s ‘what works’ agenda in UK social policy promoted a pragmatic, instrumental view of knowledge and its applications (Nutley et al., 2007). It is now recognised that the discourse of ‘what works’, despite its appealing simplicity when taken at face value, is embedded in a complex set of relations of power and politics (Newman and Nutley, 2003). Accordingly, there is a growing consensus that social services should be informed by, rather than based on, research evidence, with practitioners experiences and perspectives also taken into account (Alexanderson et al., 2009, Nevo and Slonim-Nevo, 2011). But in practice, what do practitioners and academics want from

engagement with one another? Does ‘what works’ still hold some appeal? And how does this link to different notions of impact?

In our project, the practitioners showed considerable interest in learning about what might help them in their day-to-day work. This could be seen in their response to the seminars, briefings and in the choice of topics for the practitioner research projects. For example, at our sharing seminars, whilst the main focus was on how social workers can engage with involuntary service users, we also tried to explore issues about knowledge exchange and engagement between academics and practitioners. Yet for some participants, this was seen as a deviation from the matter at hand, and “perceived as quite academic and potentially hard to see [the] direct relevance to day-to-day practice” (comment from evaluation form). Thus an element of ‘what works’ was, in our experience, an essential ingredient in ensuring that the project activities would be relevant and useful for practitioners.

However, practitioners also told us how much they valued the opportunities for discussion and reflection that the project created. Critical discourse is arguably one of the most distinctive features of the social sciences, and is an area in which academics can make a significant contribution beyond merely supplying instrumental knowledge to solve problems. Our project opened up space for critical reflection, and this was widely appreciated. Comments in the seminar evaluations repeatedly identified discussion and debate as the highlights of the event, with some attendees saying that these had been “thought provoking” and that they had enjoyed “getting away from work and reflect[ing] on practice”. The practitioners also commented on how their PRPs had begun to open up important debates within their local authorities:

“people are actually starting to engage in a debate around relationship based social work versus the culture of the last four or five years around systems and pushing bureaucratic models through...I think that’s a real challenge for people.” (Practitioner 1, comment in group discussion about impacts)

“we had a good discussion about some of the practice issues around supporting clients to take positive risks...the session itself was useful in terms of ‘awareness raising’ and offering social workers an opportunity to stand back and reflect on their practice.” (Practitioner 2, email correspondence following presentation of PRP findings to his local practitioner forum)

In summary, it seems clear that in our project, both instrumental knowledge about ‘what works’ *and* the space for critical intellectual discussion were valued by practitioners, and were not seen as incompatible.

Practitioner research as a model for knowledge exchange

Of the various methods of knowledge exchange used within the project, in our view the PRPs (practitioner research projects) were the most successful. Looking at the literature, there are a number of reasons why practitioner research might be a favourable model of knowledge exchange: it encourages ownership of research by potential users, which is known to be a key factor in research use (Walter et al., 2004); it can produce knowledge that is directly relevant to, and hence more

meaningful for the practitioners (Ross et al., 2003, Orr and Bennett, 2010); and it capitalises upon, rather than excludes, practitioner expertise, which is increasingly recognised as an important ingredient in research use (Alexanderson et al., 2009, Gray and Schubert, 2011). Our own experiences add some detail to this picture.

The PRPs were particularly successful in fostering close working relationships between social work academics and practitioners. As might be expected, the collaborative nature of the projects, with academics working as mentors, led to co-produced research which drew on the skills and experiences of both groups. Beyond this, however, the relationships created by the PRPs proved particularly valuable for achieving and monitoring impact. When following up the action cards from our first seminar (see above), for example, not only did the majority of responses come from people involved with PRPs, but the impacts reported were in general more substantial than those reported by practitioners who were not involved with a PRP. Those involved with the PRPs also provided much more detailed information about the impacts achieved.

The relationships built through the PRPs also created opportunities for further collaborations. For example, practitioners from two of the projects decided to co-author an article for *Community Care* (a publication with a wide readership amongst UK social services practitioners), and several practitioners and academics have co-authored a peer-reviewed journal article currently in press. Looking to the long term, the relationships created by the PRPs have the potential to allow information to flow in both directions; for example, the research team has been able to get email updates about impacts from the practitioners, enabling us to track the wider effects of our

project. In short, academics and practitioners working together on the PRPs has created a sense of reciprocity and collegiality that appears to have brought benefits and positive impacts to both sides. A dynamic of this kind may be essential for achieving and monitoring long term impacts in a context where all those involved have heavy workloads and other pressing priorities.

We found some evidence that the locally embedded nature of the PRPs was advantageous for dissemination and achieving impacts. There was a sense, in some cases, that the research was taken more seriously by local authorities because it had been carried out ‘on their turf’. In some cases, practitioners were also able to use their knowledge of local systems and hierarchies to their advantage:

“I did send out my project [report] to a number of people, and barely anybody read it. And then [I] reminded the higher management, twice, that he’d agreed to send it out, and when he did, then everybody started talking about it...more people read it and more people discussed it and more people commented on it. But then also people said that they read it because my name was on it – having come from higher management – because it was somebody who was familiar.” (Practitioner 3, comment in group discussion about impacts)

In this case, the relationships worked both ways: a commitment from senior management was crucial for getting the report read, but the practitioner’s position as a locally known and respected front-line social worker also helped to ensure that its message was heard.

It should be recognised that the PRPs also had many limitations. The level of commitment required meant that only small numbers of projects could take place. Furthermore, to complete the projects, practitioners needed a degree of self-motivation and enthusiasm for research that may be beyond what could reasonably be expected of most practitioners. Given the workloads of front-line public service staff in the UK and elsewhere, and the constraints of time and budget practitioner research is likely to remain a minority pursuit (Martin, 2010). There were inevitable challenges relating to differences of culture and language between academics and practitioners, as has been noted in previous studies (for example, Cunningham, 2008, Lunt et al., 2010). Following Mitchell et al. (2010), questions might also be raised about the quality of the research produced. Compared to academic researchers, the practitioners we worked with were relatively inexperienced in research. Most had little or no previous research training and all had limited time. The training we offered was constrained by the time that the practitioners could commit, and was far less comprehensive than what our institution would normally offer to research postgraduates. Despite the commitment and enthusiasm shown by the practitioners, at times they struggled to address issues of ethics, methodology and epistemology to the standards normally required of academic research. Ethical review presented particular problems. The university could not offer formal approval as the practitioners were not employed or registered as students there; but most of the local authorities had no systems for ethical audit and review. In the end, each project had to improvise its own solution, based on the limited support we could offer and the requirements of the local authority in question. To take one example, a practitioner was asked, in the absence of

research ethics guidelines at her local authority, to develop these guidelines herself – something which was less than ideal, and only added to her own workload.

Despite all of these problems, on balance we believe that the benefits of practitioner research outweighed its limitations. We might even go so far as to argue that the main benefit of the model we used was not the production of useful research findings (though of course it did achieve this), but rather the creation of lasting collaborative relationships between academics and practitioners. These relationships gave the research team valuable insights into how social work practitioners operate, and how research knowledge can function (or not) in local authorities. Similarly, the practitioners gained skills in research and insights into how academics operate. In the long term, all of this is likely to have lasting benefits for knowledge exchange beyond the immediate impacts of the PRPs' findings.

Based on our experience, we offer the following suggestions for good practice in supporting practitioner research:

- *Putting a structure in place.* This involved: (i) a timeline that was made clear at the outset, with a flowchart listing key milestones and dates, such as for the completion of research design, end of data collection, final report deadline and the dates for the training events; (ii) clear information at the outset, to both practitioners and mentors, about what was expected of them, and what level of support they could expect; (iii) a member of the research team (the research fellow) whose role was to co-ordinate the projects, organise the training events, monitor progress regularly and help motivate all those involved to ensure the

projects stayed on track. Without these structures, it is likely that most of the projects would have struggled to deliver results.

- *Flexibility around practitioners' needs and interests.* We gave the practitioners as much latitude as possible in choosing and refining their research topic. We were careful to consult with them about what was feasible e.g. in terms of their inputs to events, the timing and quantity of training events. A guiding principle was that the projects had to be of benefit to the practitioners themselves, rather than a burden. Some flexibility around the timescale was also allowed.
- *Mentoring arrangements with academics.* Our experiences support recent suggestions that mentoring from university partners can contribute to the success of practitioner research, particularly in terms of improving research quality and developing the skills of practitioners (Lunt et al., 2010, Mitchell et al., 2010). Commitment from the mentors was achieved by writing them in as co-applicants on the research proposal and costing for their time. The research fellow's co-ordination role was also crucial, as he was able to liaise with the mentors, negotiate their roles and keep them up to date about the project as it progressed.

Defining impact: academic, practitioner and service user perspectives

Research impact is currently a highly contested topic. Nutley et al. (2007:295) note that impact is “a somewhat elusive concept, difficult to operationalise, political in essence, and hard to assess”; it is therefore unsurprising that there is currently little consensus amongst academics about what constitutes impact and how it can be gauged. Debates continue about the political and economic motivations of the impact agenda, the timescales over which impacts take place, the values that might inform whether impacts are judged as positive or negative, and whether impact evaluation

will become a meaningful form of reflexive practice or merely a box-ticking bureaucratic exercise (see for example Demeritt, 2000, Canavan et al., 2009, Antonacopoulou, 2010, Armstrong and Alsop, 2010). However, in the UK at least, the notion of impact is gaining increasing traction with research and higher education funding councils, and in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a performance management system for assessing academics and higher education institutions. All of this is beginning to have major resource implications: it seems likely that those who are able to demonstrate ‘impact’ as it is defined by the research councils and the REF will be better placed to gain funding than those who are not. How impact is defined and assessed therefore matters in a very immediate and tangible way for government-funded research in the UK, and it seems clear that similar developments are taking place elsewhere too (e.g. Gray and Schubert, 2011).

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) have a broad understanding of impact, encompassing: economic benefits; effects on the environment, public health and quality of life; impacts on policy and practice in governmental, private and third sector organisations; and also knowledge exchange impacts, such as relationships that might facilitate future knowledge exchange (Armstrong and Alsop, 2010). The REF similarly encompasses “any social, economic or cultural impact or benefit beyond academia” (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2011:1) and also includes public engagement activities (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2010), but makes some more specific provisions:

- Impacts must be “underpinned by excellent research” (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2011:1) What this will mean in practice remains to be seen,

but it seems likely to favour research that has been published in peer-reviewed academic journals with international readership.

- Assessment of impact will be based on expert review of case studies submitted by higher education institutions. This places the onus on the institutions to demonstrate academics' achievements.
- Key criteria for evaluating impacts will include 'reach' and 'significance' of impacts. There is scope for these to be defined differently for different academic disciplines.
- In most cases the timescale for impacts will be up to 15 years after the publication of a research output that led to the impact in question.
- Dissemination activity without evidence of resultant benefits is excluded.

It is therefore clear that, while the rhetoric of the REF encourages a broad and inclusive definition of impact, in practice there will be some significant constraints.

Impact is likely to amount to improvements in any sphere of activity outside of academia *that can be demonstrated to have resulted from published, peer-reviewed, 'high quality' academic research*. The numerous value judgements involved – about the quality of the research, the extent of the impacts and the validity of the evidence for those impacts – will all be made by panels of academic 'experts'.

This definition of impact makes sense in relation to the REF, the aim of which is to assess and rank the performance of higher education institutions. However, we believe that this definition misses a central component of knowledge exchange: engagement with research users. The REF's conception of impact does not take into account how research users might understand impact. The assessment processes will be steered by academics, and hence will be dominated by academic notions of

research quality and impact. This seems to reify the very divisions that knowledge co-production seeks to call into question. To borrow from Demeritt (2000:324), the problem may be “not so much with the idea of making academic research publicly relevant and accountable, but with the narrowness with which public relevance, accountability, and value have been defined.”

In our experience, social work practitioners had quite different understandings of research impact. Looking at the data we gathered from practitioners, some examples of reported impacts resulting from our project include:

- Dialogue around key issues of relevance for practitioners, such as risk-taking, assessment of service users, and relational versus managerial social work.
- Findings feeding into local authority service reviews, with implications for future delivery.
- The development of training for practitioners, with research findings helping to shape the content.
- Changes reported by individual practitioners in their ways of working, such as being more pro-active in encouraging service users to participate in meetings, increasing the amount of time spent with service users, informing service users about decisions affecting them and changing their style of report writing to be more accessible for service users. In some cases it was reported that these changes had resulted in better relationships with service users.
- Impacts on workers’ research skills. This included reports of individual workers accessing research (e.g. on self-esteem measuring; theories about assessment), and a sense of increased capacity for carrying out future research amongst those involved with PRPs.

Peer-reviewed journal publication did not appear to be perceived as an essential component of impact. Indeed, some practitioners told us that they found academic journals difficult to access, and therefore of limited use. Factors such as local relevance of research, the accessibility of research documents and opportunities to discuss research findings seemed to be more important. It is also worth noting that, given the various limitations of the PRPs, if they were judged individually by social work academic ‘experts’ according to the REF criteria, it is unlikely that any would be ranked as ‘excellent research’. Yet all those who completed PRPs reported that the experience had been extremely valuable, and had produced what they saw as significant impacts, albeit at a local level.

Our final point about impact takes this discussion one step further: what about how service users might define impact? In relation to our project, the previous research literature and the PRPs identified many areas of practice in which service users want things to be different, such as more continuity of workers, more accessible reports, simpler language used in communication, greater flexibility around social work timescales and less formality in meetings. Ultimately, it could be argued that if the project had achieved genuine impact, service users in the six local authorities would report a demonstrable improvement in these areas. Furthermore, some of the impacts reported by practitioners – such as improved training, incorporation of service users views in local authority strategies, and increased research capacity – might well be seen by service users as irrelevant and of little value. Even where individual practitioners reported improved relations with service users, there is no guarantee that the feeling was reciprocal.

All of this raises a host of difficult questions: is it realistic to think that impacts from a project of this scale could be detected at the level of service user experiences? If service users' views were gathered, against what baseline could any changes be assessed? Could such changes ever be attributed to causes? What about cases where practitioner and service user views about the extent of impact are in conflict? Untangling all of these issues would take a large, long-term research project – but under the current financial climate of UK public sector cuts, it might be argued that the funds required for such a project would be better spent on front line social work services.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to address these issues. However, we see a need for greater consideration of *who* defines impact, and how impact might be understood in ways that reflect the differing agendas of the various stakeholders. We believe that the perspectives of academics and research funders should be part of the mix, but at present these risk eclipsing other voices with a vital role to play in the debate. Any meaningful discussion of research impact needs to include the perspectives of research users, and perhaps also take into account members of the wider public who ultimately stand to benefit, or not, from research impacts.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented findings from a knowledge exchange project involving academics and local authority social workers. We have shown how face-to-face contact and personal relationships were a key element of the project's success. Practitioners in our project were interested both in evidence about 'what works' and

in more open-ended opportunities for critical discussion and reflection, suggesting that instrumental and conceptual forms of research use need not be mutually exclusive (see Nutley et al., 2007:51). Practitioner research proved to be a particularly useful model of knowledge exchange and co-production, in large part due to the strength of the relationships forged.

We have also presented some reflections on the notion of impact, arguing that, in academia at least, too little account is being taken of research users' perspectives on impact. Our experience suggests that what matters to practitioners are factors such as accessibility and relevance to their local context. Yet performance management systems, such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), risk skewing research towards narrow, elitist, academic criteria about research excellence. Taking the further, there is the question of service users' views about impact, and whether these ought to feature in discussions about the costs and benefits of research. We therefore wish to conclude with a call for greater consideration of *who* defines impact, and the implications of this for research funding and knowledge exchange.

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